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Joint Chiefs' Head Warns Contras; Shultz in Aid Plea

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 12 — Adm. William C. Crowe Jr., Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned here today that the American people would stop supporting the Nicaraguan rebels unless they performed better.

In another appeal for support for the contras, Secretary of State George P. Shultz today repeated his concern that American military intervention in the region might become inevitable if Congress withdraws financing of the rebels.

At a press breakfast in Washington today, Admiral Crowe criticized the contras' political disunity and lack of military successes and said the American people would not make an indefinite commitment to support them unless they saw tangible results.

"If it doesn't do the kind of thing the American public wants it to do, then they will back out from under the commitment," he said of aid to the contras, adding, "I don't know of anybody who would ask the American public to go on and on indefinitely without progress."

Changes Called Necessary

Expressing doubts about the contras' performance, Admiral Crowe said that if they were to become a viable military force with viable foreign policy aims, "they have to change the way they're doing business." He called on the contras to move permanently into Nicaragua, make political progress and unify their leadership. The contras now operate from bases in Honduras and Costa Rica.

"If the contras can bring themselves together and sort themselves out and fight, they should be supported," he said.

Administration officials concede that at the moment prospects for an additional \$105 million in rebel aid from Congress are grim. They cite such problems as the disunity of the rebel leadership, the absence of any major rebel military victory in four years of fighting, squabbling within the Administration and continuing disclosures in the Iran-contra affair.

In a strong appeal for continued Congressional financing of the contras, Mr. Shultz, speaking at a meeting of the American Bar Association in New Orleans today, disputed the argument of critics that United States policy in Central America increases the risk of direct American military intervention.

"By supporting those Nicaraguans who are fighting for their liberty, we may avoid direct military involvement by the United States in the future," Mr. Shultz said. He characterized the contras as a force that has tried to get the Sandinistas to the bargaining table and that has endured in the face of tremendous odds.

Mr. Shultz has repeatedly warned that failure to help the contras could lead to a permanent Soviet presence in Nicaragua that could threaten other countries in the region, thereby raising the possibility of some future American military intervention.

Direct Involvement Opposed

At the same time, however, President Reagan and his top aides have called the use of American military force in Nicaragua an unlikely and undesirable last resort. In public and private statements over the last few years, the Pentagon has steadfastly opposed direct American military involvement, arguing that it could drag on for years.

While Admiral Crowe appeared to be giving an ultimatum to the contras, Mr. Shultz gave one to the Sandinistas. "They can keep the promises they made to their people and the international community to get into power; or they can accept the risk of more violent and less voluntary changes down the road."

Mr. Shultz dismissed the Iran arms crisis, which involves the possible illegal diversion of money to the contras, as a domestic matter that must not affect America's strategic and moral imperatives in Central America.

"Today's controversy over the Iran arms deal must be dealt with as a matter of purely domestic concern," he said. "It is irrelevant to the strategic and moral realities we face in the region."

He added that decisions that affect the national security "must look beyond a session of Congress or a Presidential term."

Other Administration officials, including Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, have said that a substantial part of the Administration's strategy with members of Congress will be to convince them that the two issues are separate.

Mr. Shultz repeated his long-held thesis that the United States could face a Soviet-backed strategic crisis in the region within a few years if the United States abandoned its commitment to the contras.

"Unless we meet this threat now, before it develops further, we may, within a few years, face a strategic crisis," he said.

Even legislators who support aid to the contras have complained that Reagan Administration officials have been unable to agree on a strategy. This is in part because the State Department, which has stressed the need to make the contra movement more democratic, has been at odds with the Central Intelligence Agency, which has emphasized clandestine military operations and promoted the military leadership of the organization.

"The contras have to show themselves as a legitimate democratic group whose goal is to force elections, not overthrow the Government," said Mark C. Helmke, spokesman for Senator Richard G. Lugar, Republican of Indiana, who remains committed to more aid. "That's always been the problem with this policy."

Some Administration officials describe the role of Frank C. Carlucci, the new national security adviser, as "referee" between the State Department and the C.I.A.

After the departure of William J. Casey as Director of Central Intelligence and growing criticism of the C.I.A.'s handling of the contras, the

State Department has begun to try to wrest control over Central American policy from the agency. State Department officials say that they are investing more time and resources in contra policy and that Mr. Shultz's address was part of that campaign.